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ABSTRACT

A writing instructor/graduate student investigated elements essential in helping and empowering student writers, while embarking on her own journey for a Ph.D. in rhetoric. Getting more knowledge is the catalyst that started the journey and includes the following stops: Philosophiville, Theory Town, Rhetorical Junction, and Writing Center City. Of basic importance is the obtaining of knowledge in composition theory and rhetoric, as well as the need to develop a personal philosophy which values development or natural learning. Next is the practical application of theory which helps students gain a balance of content, audience, and voice. Finally, classroom writing teachers can discover a great deal from the collaborative efforts in the writing center. Peer tutors work well with individual students because they are not evaluators, but people who are ready to listen, to read and to help. The writing center, after all, is an environment for human communication, i.e., just people interested in writing. (Fifteen references are attached.) (KEH)

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# MAINTAINING BALANCE: REMOVING OUR MASKS

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Ralph bounded through the door and flashed an inquisitive smile to Maureen, a "brainy" (egghead?) political science major and writing center tutor.

"Mz. Robb sent me; she said I had to fix this paper."

Maureen smiled as she looked Ralph over. Obviously one of the football players, the burly young man in work-out gear looked a little uncomfortable in these unfamiliar surroundings.

"Okay, sure. My name is Maureen. Can I get you to sign in while I look over your paper?"

"Well, here it is, it's about a play we read, Death of a Salesman, but how long do you think this'll take? I got practice at 3:00."

"We'll be finished long before that because we only allow an hour for appointments. If we need more time, we'll schedule another appointment. Now, let's look over your paper, Ralph."

An hour later Ralph was signing up for another appointment. He didn't know it at the time, but that afternoon he started an adventure--a true hero's journey. Over the course of the next few weeks we learned a lot about Ralph and something about ourselves as well. Attending school on a football scholarship, the first person in his family to graduate from high school, Ralph surprised and delighted the tutors in the center because he had definite

opinions on the play. He related to the play on a very personal level and provided insights the tutors had not considered. He spoke openly and poignantly about how specific scenes reminded him of earlier experiences with his father and also caused him to see his relationship with his baby daughter differently. After Ralph had finished his revision, the writing center seemed unusually still. Our dialogues with Ralph had been satisfying; we missed him.

One morning a tutor who was studying Joseph Campbell's Hero with a Thousand Faces reminisced about Ralph. "Gee, Mrs. B., Ralph just fits this hero stuff that Campbell talks about. He chose something higher than himself, moved into an area of darkness, changed with the help of an old hag, really went through a transformation."

"Well, thanks Kelly, that's the first time I've been called an old hag today--and in such a sweet way."

It's nice to think that Ralph and all students can make that hero's journey. But maybe it's more than nice. Maybe it's critical that we who work with writers believe those writers can make that journey. It's also critical to us as writing coaches, wisewomen, shamen or old hags to prepare ourselves to offer the best counsel and wisest advice we can. Whether we like it or not, we become responsible for lighting the way--making the transformation smoother, building the confidence needed to meet the challenge--which may seem more like a marathon than a walk in the park.

So we ask ourselves, what can we do to assist? As writing assistants, how can we be more effective in working with all the students who come to the center?

The first thought is almost automatic: Get more knowledge. And certainly knowledge is a good thing. Classical orators said knowledge is very important. In Phaedrus Plato says, "A man must know the truth about all the particular things of which he speaks or writes..." (Benson 40). My personal quest for knowledge was aided by a little encouragement from the college where I work: "If you want a "real job," you have to have a real PH.D." What at first seemed like a Herculean undertaking has become a real journey for me--we'll call it a heroine's journey after and if I emerge from the dark waters of the rhetoric program at IUP.

Getting more knowledge (or at least the right initials after my name) was indeed the catalist that started me on this journey. However, after reflecting on the newfound knowledge for more than a year, then being literally bombarded with tons of heavy new stuff about rhetoric, I've arrived at some tentative conclusions about how I can be a wiser old hag. Emphasizing that knowledge is constructed, dynamic and organic, as well as individual and personal, I'd love to have company on this journey. Today's itinerary will include the following stops: Philosophiville, Theory Town, Rhetorical Junction, and Writing Center City. Just a

couple of warnings before we head out: This person brakes for new ideas. And the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step--mine may be a baby step, but I love walking.

If anyone had asked me in June of 1989 how much I valued philosophy and theory, I would have said not much. Give me a good cookbook, not necessarily a Boynton Cook book, some good methods and I know I can be a good teacher--afterall I'd been teaching for almost 20 years and I certainly hadn't spent lots of time thinking about philosophy or theory--who has time with 100 papers to read regularly. Oh sure, I'd written those dumb "My Philosophy of Education" things in college and on job applications--but I was not the philosophy type. I was the practical type.

My practical position was left slightly askew after four introductory doctorial classes at IUP. However, I really started to believe in a need for philosphical grounding when I attended a whole language seminar for elementary teachers back home this past winter. Featured speaker, Don Holdaway, told about the dramatic results of a Whole Language approach in New Zealand. But he cautioned that a teacher must first have a philosophy which values developmental or natural learning. Such a commitment makes it possible for a teacher to make any method work. If we see Whole Language as a method, he cautioned, it will be out of fashion in about five years.

Okay, I told myself, I do believe in natural learning. I do believe that there is a common denominator for all human beings: the ability to think. As Aristotle so eloquently put it: "the mental affectations themselves, of which ...words are primarily signs, are the same for the whole of mankind" (qt. in Knoblauch, "Modern" p. 32). And all that Kenneth Bruffee, new paradigm stuff about socially constructed knowledge seems reasonable. I'll add to this mixture a generous amount of what has been summed up nicely by Bob Honeman: "teaching with love in our hearts." This seems to be a big, loose-shirt kind of a philosophy; I'll have plenty of room to grow. But we can't spend all our time in Philosophiville, let's get this show on the road. Next stop: Theory Town.

My gosh, what a collosal place--a real jungle for the newcomer. There are lots of nice neighborhoods to walk through, but is there any one that we really want to live in? If I decide to buy in the Neo-Platonic subdivision with the Expressionists, can't I still socialize with the Traditionalists, and the New Rhetoricians, maybe even occassionally with the Current Traditionalists? Edward P. J. Corbett makes sense to me when he defends the teaching of classical rhetoric. "What was once so vital cannot be, even with the passage of time and the creation of a new world, entirely irrelevant and ineffectual" (qt. in Moran, 1990). Just being written 2000 years ago doesn't mean the rhetoric

is without value any more than being written in 1990 means something's relevant.

We need to spend more time in Theory Town because it's an important part of the overall journey. Without some understanding of what researchers and theorists have learned about why and how people use language in general and writing in particular, I have no way of judging the effectiveness of what I do. But theory without application is not enough. In an article calling for the revival of sophistry, Sharon Crowley (1989) tells us that "the Greek word from which theory is derived originally designated a spectator who sat in the furthermost rows of the theater, literally 'observing from afar'" (p. 330.) Theorists are not usually the ones getting down and dirty in the trenches. So while theory may guide me, it won't get me through Monday morning. And since most of us are looking for some practical application, let's blow this place and move on to Rhetorical Junction.

Rhetorical Junction was once almost a ghost town, but lately people are beginning to look this place over again. A good tour guide might be the old-timer, Wayne Booth. Almost thirty years ago, Booth (1963) wrote that the common ingredient in all admirable writing, excluding novels, plays, and poems, is the "rhetorical stance." He described this stance as "a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and

peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker" (p. 153). Sounds a lot like classical rhetoric if we instead say logos, pathos, and ethos.

It's true that every writer must somehow come to grips with this balancing act at some point in the writing process. That's easily said, but often difficult to do--even for experienced writers. In an article, "Working With Advanced Writers, "Maxine Hairston (1984) says her students often "reveal no sense of audience for their writing,...show no sense of purpose except to fill a requirement, and...have no persona or 'voice'" (p. 198). Sharon Crowley (1989) gives an example from a student paper that illustrates this lack of rhetorical stance: "Abortion is murder for the following three reasons:" Crowley points out that this voice "since it is intended for no ears or eyes except those of the teacher and perhaps some fellow students, takes no risks, hazards no conclusions, assumes no authority, subscribes to no value system" (p. 326). But how do we help our students gain such a balance? We teachers toss around words like content, audience, and voice without a second thought (Toby Fulwiler (1990) shows us that even the experts have trouble with such terms in his recent CCC essay on voice.), but these are often hollow words for our students. Let's consider an exercise as a way to help students get some idea of content, audience, and voice. (See Appendix.)

Even the most inexperienced writers can be AUTHOR-ities if we can provide a safe environment where they can take off their masks and reveal or create ethos--voice, persona, self. That's not easy. In an essay called "On the End of Rhetoric, Classical and Modern," S. Mike Halloran (1975) explains why: "Language is always a disclosure--more or less deliberate, profound, and honest--of the one who speaks, of his personal view of the world" (p. 631). Maxine Hairston (1986) agrees: "What one puts on a piece of paper becomes the self...we expose what we are by writing" (p. 63). I think the teaching that is done in writing centers provides some models for building a safe environment where writers can take some risks. Next stop: Writing Center City.

Wait a minute! This Writing Center City is a dump. Why would anyone want to spend time in a hole like this? I'm willing to bet that the writing centers in most schools are located on the "fringe" of the campus--both literally and figuratively. If we were to make a documentary about the history of the writing center at Mesa State, a good title would be To Hall and Back. We started in a tiny hallway of a building that was about to be torn down. When we lost that spot, we moved first to an unused faculty lavatory, then to a basement hallway of an old house just across from the campus (We fondly called it the Dungeon). Now, we are housed in the larger hallway on the floor of English faculty offices.

The physical facilities may be less than wonderful, but our "Ivory" basements provide safe environments where collaborative learning can thrive. One rare commodity that we offer is time. Though we can get a little frantic periodically, most of our appointments are leisurely paced. Describing "liberatory" centers, John and Tilly Warnock (1984) mention the several attributes. Teachers in a writing center do not stand. They usually sit along side the writers. The staff may be designated tutors, assistants, peer tutors, but they'r not usually called Professor or Doctor. It's often impossible to distinguish among various ranks. The assistants in the center are not evaluators but people who are ready to listen, to read, to help students imagine an audience, form intentions, and realize them " (pp.16-23). Thus, argues John Trimbur (1985) "peer tutoring in writing centers contributes to the formation of student culture that takes writing and intellectual activity seriously" (p. 105). In more succinct terms, Patrick Hartwell (1984) agrees, "A writing center provides an environment rich in humane commitment to human communication" (p. 60).

At the same time we in writing centers seek to demystify writing, we try to build on the myths and metaphors that we all share as human beings. We take writing personally and agree with Kate Ronald that "composition as a discipline needs to place the subjective

sense of itself in the foreground much more than it currently does" (28). Composition theory seems to confirm the adage that a writer discovers what he or she has to say by writing. "Perhaps, too, a writer has to write in order to discover--and to create--who he or she is" (Minot, 360). The collaborative setting of the writing center provides a place where the writer can reveal this emerging self.

The assistants in our writing center work hard to gain the trust of the students. We have no experts--and this includes the director--just people interested in writing. Our tutors are selected subjectively based on recommendations of faculty and other tutors. Sounds pretty unscientific. I used to worry about not giving a battery of tests to perspective tutors as I read about such practices in scholarly journals. I worry less now. Somehow I can't imagine Paulo Freire requiring the Briggs-Stratton Inventory before he let his teachers go into the fields. Composition theorists such as Knoblauch, Brannon, and Ede all underscore the role of non-experts. I agree with Lisa Ede (1989) that "it's hardly necessary to master the philosophical tradition before one can contribute to the ongoing conversation about writing as a social process" (p. 11). It's time we learn to trust our instincts and intuitions more. We classroom teachers can learn a great deal from the collaborative efforts in the writing center. If we can believe as Aristotle that all men and women

desire to know, we may be able to accomplish the kind of humane teaching James Britton advocates: "Teaching that 'covets' for students a fuller life, a greater responsiveness to people and events, a greater readiness to 'face what happens' and to behave rationally" (qt. by Warnock, CCC, p.180).

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